



## The Burning Bush - Online article archive

### **Eilis O'Hanlon: Either Gerry Adams was in the IRA or he wasn't ... it shouldn't be reduced to a question of tribal loyalty**

By Eilis O'Hanlon, September 19th, 2019 published in the Belfast Telegraph



According to the news, Linda Dillon is Sinn Fein's "legacy spokesperson". We're just going to have to take the party's word for it. Most people probably couldn't pick the Coalisland woman out of a line-up of one, so low is her profile; and perhaps she can't be blamed for that.

Dillon has only been MLA for Mid Ulster since the May 2016 election and Stormont hasn't been sitting for most of that time. It can't have helped her become a household name in Northern Ireland.

Whoever she is, Linda Dillon appears to have drawn the short straw in the last day or two and has been shoved forward since the latest instalment of the BBC's Secret History of the Troubles to declare that she stands by her former leader, Gerry Adams, when he insists that he was never a member of the IRA.

"I have no reason to not believe him," she told Radio Ulster's Talkback in a somewhat sideways manner on Tuesday, before adding, in case there was still any doubt: "I believe him." What else is a loyal republican to say when put on the spot?

This moment was always going to come in the seven-part series. It could hardly have ignored Gerry Adams's role in the Troubles, or gloss over the thorny question of his membership of the Provisional IRA.

While consistently denied by the man himself, his presence at the higher echelons of the organisation has been affirmed repeatedly by numerous other sources, from the late Old Bailey bomber Dolours Price to former IRA chief of staff Sean MacStiofain.

Now, it seems we must go through the familiar ritual dance of claim and denial all over again, as veteran republican Des Long becomes the latest to break ranks by recalling sitting opposite Adams in IRA meetings.

Linda Dillon isn't the only one in Sinn Fein who's come out batting for Gerry Adams. Plenty of others have jumped to his defence, often in convoluted ways that don't sound as heartfelt as they might.

His successor as party leader, Mary Lou McDonald, also did so last year, when she pointed out, as if this was any proof in itself, that he'd never been convicted of IRA membership. Since when were republicans so fond of using the British courts to back up their arguments?

To say defending Gerry Adams is a thankless task is an understatement. Just 4% of people polled by RTE in the Republic a few years ago said they believed his denials of IRA membership. Another survey around the same time found that six out of 10 Sinn Fein supporters didn't believe him, either. It's hardly a resounding endorsement.

The Shinnners are big boys and girls. Their plight doesn't merit anyone's sympathy. But it's quite an invidious position to be put in by their former leader.

They're all forced to show solidarity by parroting the same words and phrases.

Those who defend him might suspect that what they're saying is nonsense.

Everyone listening is certainly of the opinion that it's nonsense and thinks less of those who say it, anyway. But, still, his colleagues have to do it, or risk being branded as disloyal if they don't.



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Some might say it's not very comradely of Gerry to put his friends and supporters in that position.

Standing before the cameras, trotting out the usual denials and disclaimers, they look as tense as if they're in a hostage video, reading out statements prepared by their captors.

That they're willing to do so, however bad the optics, has wider consequences.

As noted already, Linda Dillon is Sinn Fein's legacy spokeswoman. Earlier this year, the party marched through the streets under the banner 'Time For Truth'.

Placards carried that day bore such slogans as 'Families have a right to truth' and 'Set the truth free'. Martina Anderson even brought a delegation to Brussels, where the MEP talked eloquently about "the journey to truth and justice".

It makes a mockery of Sinn Fein's demand for everyone to come clean on what happened in the past if, at the same time, they continue to hold the party line on things that most people simply don't believe to be true.

Their only tactic is to attack the messenger, with former MP and Stormont minister Conor Murphy accusing Des Long of being "bitter".

If Long had stayed in the Provos, instead of defecting to Republican Sinn Fein in the 1980s following the split, he'd still be a hero. Instead, he's denounced as unworthy of trust.

This is a classic example of an "ad hominem" argument, which seeks to undermine what someone says by attacking their character and motives.

All these poisonous consequences flow from the decision to wholeheartedly shore up their former leader's insistence that he was not in the IRA.

It could be that Gerry Adams himself is in an impossible position.

Let's just say, for argument's sake, that Des Long is telling the truth.

Having denied it so long, for whatever reason, it's arguable that the man against whom this allegation is being laid simply can't admit it - even if he wanted to - because that would open him up to an avalanche of other questions about his involvement in specific operations.

It might also, unlikely as that might be, lead to his prosecution. That's why Martin McGuinness lied under oath at the Bloody Sunday Inquiry about leaving the IRA in 1974.

Ultimately, it's to themselves that terrorists lie most of all. Des Long was guilty of the same self-deception in the BBC programme, when he said that the people he knew in the IRA back in the day were "straightforward and honest".

Former IRA member Shane Paul Doherty has detailed a litany of instances when the Provos lied about their involvement in various atrocities, including the Abercorn and Claudy bombings and the disappearance of Jean McConville.

To suggest that there was anything "straightforward and honest" about the IRA is the biggest fairy story of all.

But even if Gerry Adams really was at home washing his beard during the entirety of the Troubles, it's not politically healthy to expect his successors in Sinn Fein to act in retrospect as his political alibis.

Linda Dillon was born in 1978. How can she possibly know what a 70-year-old republican was up to before she was born?



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